

## **Distance continuing education for enterprises in European universities**

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In a recent survey we hold on university continuing education for enterprises, five European university centres for continuing education were visited, in five different countries. One of our topics of study was to find out what was the role that distance education could play in continuing education specially designed to enterprises, according to the experience these centres have in this field, and according to our previous research on enterprises training needs.

### **Advantages and limitations of distance education**

In our enquiry, the following advantages were indicated, as far as distance education is concerned: learning packages; formative intentionality of the materials; concern regarding students' needs and motivation; teachers' training; more concern on pedagogical issues; teachers' meetings; tutorial; building up of a pedagogical model from the beginning, and knowledge up-dating without time limitations.

The following limitations were indicated: standard education; high cost of materials; low social interaction; time consuming and sophisticated process; students might find it difficult to organise their study timetable; low teacher/student's interaction; students can waste their time travelling in Internet, instead of studying, and finally, group dynamics does not work so well in the Internet as in face-to-face courses.

Relating to pedagogical models, while in face-to-face university continuing education, the lecture mode still prevails, in continuing education a determined pedagogical model is actually chosen (mostly models employing constructivist theories and stressing collaborative learning). Moreover, course planning is discussed and teachers and technical staff are gathered to held discussions and have a common view of the education they are delivering.

Also in distance education, issues such as motivation and coaching are really taken into account. In our opinion, the reason for such careful attention on such items lies in the fact that distance education courses are very expensive to build up, so it is necessary to find out the best way to reach the student, to make him or her happy with Internet courses, otherwise distance education products will not be sold and, as we know, competition is hard.

### **University continuing education and the size of enterprises**

Considering the whole of continuing education for enterprises (face-to-face and distance learning), from the five centres for continuing education inquired, four declared that their clients were mainly large companies. One declared their clients were mainly large and medium size enterprises and only one organises education specially directed to SMEs. Besides, this last example was publicly-supported, SMEs contributing with no more than a third of the total cost of the courses.

Why do SMEs have so much difficulty in addressing themselves to universities for the continuing education of their staff?

Two main reasons can explain this difficulty: on the one hand, in many cases, SMEs cannot afford continuing education; on the other hand, especially in what concerns small enterprises, sometimes with no more than one or two individuals, managers have not a university education background. So, they often do not trust academics' skills and think university is totally apart from enterprises reality.

This may also be explained by the lack of tradition in the relationship between academic world and work world. In addition, due to information gaps, especially small enterprises are not aware of the strategic value of education and training for their competitive advantage. As a matter of fact, a study (GONÇALVES, 94)

on training needs of Portuguese enterprises showed that the demand for education and training increases with the size of enterprises, in other words, education and training are demanded mainly by large companies.

In addition, it should be mentioned that the need of education and training for Portuguese SMEs managers is often stressed not only by politics but also by economists, due to the weak education and training of most of them (GONÇALVES, 1994). More recently, an OECD report (OECD, 2000) claims for management training as a means to reduce the failure rates of small firms and recommends greater use of electronic delivery of training through the Internet.

### **Enterprises needs in continuing education**

To offer continuing education programmes for enterprises, university centres for continuing education must know enterprises education and training needs. This turns out to be a problem when considering SMEs, especially very small ones. The above-mentioned study on Portuguese enterprises training needs, (GONÇALVES, 1994) showed that it was very difficult to assert the explicit education and training needs of enterprises. When enterprises stated their training needs, they were referred to in terms of *social skills, learning to learn, being able of changing behaviours, team work skill, sharing managerial responsibilities and problem solving*.

### **Face-to-face or distance education?**

In our recent inquiry, directors of university centres for continuing education were asked which of the two types of education – face-to-face or distance – they believe are the most adequate for enterprises. 40% are in favour of face-to-face, while 60% believe a combination of the two would be the most effective.

However, even those who are more in favour of face-to-face education are also investing in distance education, which is felt by these directors as a «challenge», although «there is a strong competition in this field of distance education for enterprises»; nevertheless, it is something that university continuing education «has to try», although they allowed they did not have enough experience in this field of distance education. In fact, most distance education experiences in university centres for continuing education are very

recent, some had started no longer than a few months before our visit, and Internet courses were not developed yet, or they were just starting.

According to the information we gathered in university centres for continuing education, large companies rely more in face-to-face education, because of the interaction of professionals in continuing education activities. In fact, recent studies on «communities of practice» demonstrate the importance of team interaction, shared vision and shared purpose in knowledge and skills acquisition.

Effective learning is more and more associated with communication and information sharing. Also management literature (Pappows (1999); Stewart (1999); Sveiby (1998) and Nonaka & Takeuchi (1997)) emphasise the relevance of tacit knowledge in building «knowledge organisations», where knowledge is created, shared and spread. Sveiby (1998) argues that knowledge is rooted in people and that knowledge creation occurs in the process of social interaction.

Face-to-face is undoubtedly more adequate to develop social interaction. Social interaction seems to be the «Achilles heel» of distance education, because of the lack of visual contact, impossibility of expressing and picking up non-verbal reactions and difficulty in establishing working relationships and ground rules for participation. Still we think this is not an either or issue, and distance education has a prominent role to play in continuing education for enterprises.

Whenever possible, the best choice might be a combination of face-to-face and distance education. However, for small enterprises, especially in large countries where such enterprises are often geographically isolated, sometimes the question is either distance education or no education at all. In this case, we think well should be left alone.

## **Summarising**

Our research suggests that, as far as university continuing distance education for enterprises, research is needed both into funding models and into ways to develop social interaction. Furthermore, systematic evaluation during the courses and follow up should be done, as well as accurate training needs analysis.

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